20. Memorandum from U.S. Delegate at the UN William Attwood to Gordon Chase of the National Security Council Staff

By the autumn of 1963 the Kennedy administration was pursuing a two-track policy toward Castro. While sabotage activities against Cuba continued, an effort was under way to develop a secret dialogue with Castro, with a view to achieving some sort of accommodation between Havana and Washington. UN official William Attwood, formerly an editor of Look *magazine, was a key figure in this diplomatic endeavor. Here he recounts his role in the period from August through early November 1963.*

New York, November 8, 1963.

Following is a chronology of events leading up to Castro's invitation on October 31, to receive a U.S. official for talks in Cuba:

Soon after joining the U.S. Mission to the U.N. on August 26, I met Seydou Diallo, the Guinea Ambassador to Havana, whom I had known well in Conakry.[1] He went out of his way to tell me that Castro was isolated from contact with neutralist diplomats by his "Communist entourage" because it was known he was unhappy with Cuba's satellite status and looking for a way out. He, Diallo, had finally been able to see Castro alone once and was convinced he was personally receptive to changing courses and getting Cuba on the road to non-alignment. Diallo added that the exile raids [on Cuba] were an obstacle since they strengthened the hand of the hard-liners both with Castro and the public.

In the first week of September, I also read ABC correspondent, Lisa Howard's article, "Castro's Overture,"[2] based on her conversation with Castro last April. This article stressed Castro's expressed desire for reaching an accommodation with the United States and his willingness to make substantial concessions to this end.[3] On September 12, I talked with Miss Howard, whom I have known for some years, and she echoed Ambassador Diallo's opinion that there was a rift between Castro and the Guevara-Hart-Alveida group[4] on the question of Cuba's future course.

On September 12, I discussed this with Under Secretary Harriman in Washington. He suggested I prepare a memo and we arranged to meet in New York the following week.

On September 18, I wrote a memorandum based on these talks and on corroborating information I had heard in Conakry. In it I suggested that discreet

[1]Attwood had been U.S. ambassador to Guinea from March 1961 to May 1963.

[2]In *War/Peace Report*, September 1963.

[3]Cuban officials had expressed an interest in improved relations with the United States on several occasions. See Mark J. White, *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, 1996), pp. 51–53.

[4]A reference to various senior Cuban political figures.

contact might be established with the Cubans at the United Nations to find out whether Castro in fact wanted to talk, and on our terms. I showed this memo to Ambassador Stevenson, who felt the matter was worth exploring quietly and who indicated he might discuss it with the President.

On September 19, I met Harriman in New York. After reading my memo, he suggested I also discuss it with the Attorney-General [Robert Kennedy] because of the political implications of the Cuban issue.

On September 20, I made an appointment with the Attorney-General in Washington. Meanwhile, Stevenson obtained the President's approval for me to make discreet contact with Dr. Lechuga, Cuba's chief delegate at the United Nations.

On September 23, I met Dr. Lechuga at Miss Howard's apartment. She has been on good terms with Lechuga since her visit with Castro and invited him for a drink to met [sic] some friends who had also been to Cuba. I was just one of those friends. In the course of our conversation, which started with recollections of my own talks with Castro in 1959, I mentioned having read Miss Howard's article. Lechuga hinted that Castro was indeed in a mood to talk, especially with someone he had met before. He thought there was a good chance that I might be invited to Cuba if I wished to resume our 1959 talk. I told him that in my present position, I would need official authorization to make such a trip, and did not know if it would be forthcoming. However, I said an exchange of views might well be useful and that I would find out and let him know.

On September 24, I saw the Attorney-General in Washington, gave him my September 18 memo, and reported my meeting with Lechuga. He said he would pass the memo on to Mr. McGeorge Bundy; meanwhile, he thought that it would be difficult for me to visit Cuba without it being known and risking the accusation that we were trying to make a deal with Castro. He wondered if it might be possible to meet Castro—if that's what he wanted—in another country, such as Mexico, or at the United Nations. Meanwhile, he agreed it would be useful to maintain contact with Lechuga. I said I would so inform Lechuga and wait to hear from him or Bundy.

Back in New York, I informed Stevenson of my talk with Lechuga and the Attorney-General.

On September 27, I ran into Lechuga at the United Nations, where he was doing a television interview in the lobby with Miss Howard. I told him that I had discussed our talk in Washington, and that it was felt that my accepting an invitation to go to Cuba would be difficult under present circumstances, especially in view of my official status. I added, however, that if Castro or a personal emissary had something to tell us, we were prepared to meet him and listen wherever else would be convenient. Lechuga said he would so inform Havana. Meanwhile, he forewarned me that he would be making a "hard" anti-U.S. speech in the United Nations on October 7. I remarked that it wouldn't help reduce tensions; he replied he couldn't help making it because of the "blockade."[5]

On October 7, in his reply to Lechuga's tough speech, Stevenson suggested

[5]Perhaps a reference to the American economic embargo on Cuba, imposed in February 1962.

(continued from front flap)

that if Castro wanted peace with his neighbors, he need only do three things—stop being a Soviet stooge, stop trying to subvert other nations, and start carrying out the promises of his revolution regarding constitutional rights.

On October 18, at dinner at the home of Mrs. Eugene Meyer, I talked with Mr. C. A. Doxiades, a noted Greek architect and town-planner, who had just returned from an architects' congress in Havana, where he had talked alone to both Castro and Guevara, among others. He sought me out, as a government official, to say he was convinced Castro would welcome a normalization of relations with the United States if he could do so without losing too much face. He also said that Guevara and the other communists were opposed to any deal, and regarded Castro as dangerously unreliable; and that they would get rid of Castro if they thought they could carry on without him and retain his popular support.

On October 20, Miss Howard asked me if she might call Major Rene Vallejo, a Cuban surgeon who is also Castro's current right-hand man and confidant. She said Vallejo helped her see Castro and made it plain to her he opposed the Guevara group. They became friends and have talked on the phone several times since the interview. Miss Howard's purpose in calling him now was that she thought any message from Lechuga would not get past the foreign office, and she wanted to make certain, through Vallejo, that Castro knew there was a U.S. official available if he wanted to talk. I told her to go ahead, so long as she referred to my talk with Lechuga and made it quite plain we were not soliciting a meeting but only expressing our willingness to listen to anything they had to say. She then called Vallejo at his home. He was out and she left word for him to call her back.

On October 21, Gordon Chase called me from the White House in connection with my September 18 memo. I brought him up to date and said the ball was in their court.

On October 23, Vallejo called Miss Howard at her New York apartment. She was out of town; he left word with the maid that he would call again.

On October 28, I ran into Lechuga in the U.N. Delegates Lounge. He told me that Havana did not think sending someone to the United Nations for talks would be "useful at this time." But he hoped he and I might have some informal chats from time to time. I said it was up to him and he could call me if he felt like it. He wrote down my extension.

On October 29, Vallejo again called Miss Howard at home. He assured her, in response to her question, that Castro still felt as he did in April about improving relations with us. As to his going to the United Nations or elsewhere for such a talk, Vallejo said it was impossible for Castro to leave the country at the present time. But he said he would relay her message to Castro (that there was now a U.S. official authorized to listen to him), and would call her back soon.

On October 31, Vallejo called Miss Howard, apologizing for the delay and saying he had been out of town with Castro and "could not get to a phone from which I could call you." He said Castro would very much like to talk to the U.S. official anytime and appreciated the importance of discretion to all concerned. Castro would therefore be willing to send a plane to Mexico to pick up the official and fly him to a private airport near Veradero where Castro would talk to

him alone. The plane would fly him back immediately after the talk. In this way there would be no risk of identification at Havana airport. Miss Howard said she doubted if a U.S. official could come to Cuba but perhaps he, Vallejo, could come and see the official at the U.N. or in Mexico, as Castro's personal spokesman. Vallejo replied that Castro wanted to do the talking himself but did not completely rule out this situation if there was no other way of engaging a dialogue. It was agreed Miss Howard would relay the invitation to me and call Vallejo back as soon as possible with our reply. At this point she identified me as the U.S. official. Vallejo asked for the spelling, and recalled having met me in 1959 (I do not remember him). Miss Howard got the impression that Lechuga's previous message to Havana had not reached Vallejo or Castro.

On November 1, Miss Howard reported the Vallejo call to me and I repeated it to Chase on November 4.

On November 5, I met with Bundy and Chase at the White House and informed them of the foregoing. The next day, Chase called and asked me to put it in writing.

21. Memorandum for the Record

CIA Director McCone presents an update on the situation in Cuba, and JFK and his advisers evaluate their sabotage program.

Washington, November 12, 1963, 10:30 a.m.

SUBJECT

Meeting on Policy Relating to Cuba—10:30 a.m.—12 Nov 63

IN ATTENDANCE

The President, Secty. McNamara, Secty. Rusk, Secty. Gilpatric, Attorney General [Robert Kennedy], Secty. Vance, General Taylor, Mr. Bundy, Secty. Johnson, Mr. McCone, Mr. Helms, Mr. FitzGerald, Mr. Shackley

McCone opened the meeting with a brief résumé of conditions in Cuba along these lines:

1. Cuba still belongs to Castro though his grip is weakening.

2. The military remain essentially loyal to Castro with some evidences of dissension and dissidents which are being exploited by CIA.

3. The internal security forces and apparatus are effective and show evidence of increasing efficiency.

4. The economy is bad and is deteriorating, causing increasing hardships to the civilian population. . . .

5. The Soviets are continuing a gradual withdrawal. No organized Soviet units appear in Cuba although they apparently provide principal manning for the SAMs. There are recent evidences of considerable rotation with between 1,000 and 2,000 new arrivals, but in balance there is a decrease.

6. Training of Cubans continues on all Soviet equipment including the SAMs. It is not clear whether the SAMs will be turned over to full Cuban control; however it is clear the Cubans will supply the majority of the operating personnel.

7. The only equipment which has been withdrawn has been the advanced C-band radar for the SAMs and certain communication equipment. No military equipment has been withdrawn. There have been some recent new arrivals of military equipment, particularly between 25 and 50 tanks.

McCone then stated that the program which had been followed for the last several months, having been approved about the first of June,[1] was integrated and interdependent one part on the other and therefore should be considered as a comprehensive program and not a number of independent actions.

FitzGerald then made a presentation.[2]

With respect to sabotage, McCone stated that no one event will particularly affect the economy. However a continuous program will have its effects on the economy and it will encourage internal sabotage by dissident people within Cuba. There have been 109 events since April which were probably internally-inspired sabotage.

The President then raised the question of the sabotage program; whether it was worthwhile and whether it would accomplish our purpose.

Secretary Rusk then spoke at considerable length, the thrust of his remarks being opposed to sabotage. He stated we should concentrate on obtaining information as to what Castro is doing with respect to other countries, particularly sending arms to Latin American countries. Rusk said we must replace Castro; we must accomplish a reduction in Soviet troops, however sabotage might result in an increase in troops. Rusk had no problem with infiltration of black teams; furthermore internal sabotage gave him no problem and the more of this, the better. In addition he strongly supported our economic efforts. However he opposed the hit-and-run sabotage tactics as being unproductive, complicating our relationships with the Soviets and also with our friends and indicated a connection between our sabotage activities and the autobahn problem.[3]

McCone observed that infiltration was difficult, internal sabotage was extremely difficult to stimulate but that external hit-and-run sabotage had the effect of automatically stimulating internal sabotage.

McNamara could see no connection between the Cuban operations and the Berlin autobahn incidents. He saw many advantages to going ahead which he advocated but ordered a careful watch.

[1]This was the sabotage program approved by JFK on June 19, 1963. See Documents 15 and 16.

[2]FitzGerald's presentation was a progress report on the six-point covert program proposed by the CIA on June 8 and endorsed by JFK eleven days later. See Documents 15 and 16.

[3]In early November the Russians had harassed traffic en route to Berlin, detaining a British and American convoy for nearly two days before allowing it to proceed down the Autobahn.

The President asked questions concerning the immediate operations, and the next one on the schedule was approved.[4] . . .

22. Memorandum for the Record Prepared by the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy

A memorandum by his national security adviser indicates that JFK was interested in generating a dialogue with Castro via intermediaries, though he did not want the talks to commence in Cuba.

Washington, November 12, 1963.

I talked this afternoon with William Attwood and told him that at the President's instruction I was conveying this message orally and not by cable. I told him that the President hoped he would get in touch with Vallejo to report that it did not seem practicable to us at this stage to send an American official to Cuba and that we would prefer to begin with a visit by Vallejo to the U.S. where Attwood would be glad to see him and to listen to any messages he might bring from Castro. In particular, we would be interested in knowing whether there was any prospect of important modification in those parts of Castro's policy which are flatly unacceptable to us: namely, the three points in Ambassador Stevenson's recent speech[1] of which the central elements are (1) submission to external Communist influence, and (2) a determined campaign of subversion directed at the rest of the Hemisphere. Reversals of these policies may or may not be sufficient to produce a change in the policy of the United States, but they are certainly necessary, and without an indication of readiness to move in these directions, it is hard for us to see what could be accomplished by a visit to Cuba.

I left it to Attwood how much of this he would convey in the initial message to Vallejo, and I also gave him discretion as to how this message was to be transmitted, with the proviso that it must be clear at all times that we were not supplicants in this matter and that the initiative for exploratory conversations was coming from the Cubans. Attwood indicated to me that he expected Lisa Howard to telephone Vallejo and then probably to get on the line himself to handle the conversation along the lines stated above. Attwood will report the results of this communication and in the event that an arrangement is made for Vallejo to come to New York Attwood will come to Washington to concert a position for his use in this conversation.

[4]McCone produced this memorandum.
[1]Delivered October 7.

23. Memorandum from Gordon Chase of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy

On the day of John Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, William Attwood records the developments that had taken place during the final days of the Kennedy presidency regarding the attempt to hold private discussions with Cuban officials. What might be called the Attwood initiative raises the question whether relations between Washington and Havana would have improved had JFK not been assassinated.

Washington, November 25, 1963.

SUBJECT

Cuba—Bill Attwood

1. Attached is an unsolicited chronology from Bill Attwood which describes the activities of the Cuba–Attwood tie-line from November 11 to the present. Apparently, the memo was dispatched on November 22, but because of the recent events,[1] did not reach us until today.

Attachment

Memorandum From William Attwood to Gordon Chase of the National Security Council Staff

New York, November 22, 1963.

Following is an addition to my memorandum to you dated November 8, 1963:[2]

On November 11, Vallejo called Miss Howard again to reiterate their appreciation of the need for security and to say that Castro would go along with any arrangements we might want to make. He specifically suggested that a Cuban plane could come to Key West and pick up the emissary; alternatively they would agree to have him come in a U.S. plane which could land at one of several "secret airfields" near Havana. He emphasized that only Castro and himself would be present at the talks and that no one else—he specifically mentioned Guevara—would be involved. Vallejo also reiterated Castro's desire for this talk and hoped to hear our answer soon.

On November 12, Bundy called me and I reported Vallejo's message. He said this did not affect the White House decision that a preliminary talk with Vallejo

[1]Namely, the assassination of JFK in Dallas on November 22.
[2]See Document 20.

at the United Nations should be held in order to find out what Castro wanted to talk about—particularly if he was seriously interested in discussing the points cited in Stevenson's October 7 speech.[3] Bundy suggested I transmit our decision to Vallejo, stressing the fact that, since we are responding to their invitation and are not soliciting a meeting, we would like to know more about what is on Castro's mind before committing ourselves to further talks in Cuba.

On November 13, I went to Miss Howard's apartment and called Vallejo at home. There was no answer. She then sent a telegram asking that he call her at his convenience.

On November 14, Vallejo called her. She gave him my message—that we would want to talk to him here at the United Nations before accepting an invitation to go to Cuba. She said that, if he wished to confirm or discuss this further with the U.S. official, he could call him (Vallejo) at home on the evening of November 18. Vallejo said he would be there to receive the call. Meanwhile, he did not exclude the possibility of his coming to the United Nations and said he would discuss it with Castro.

On November 18, Miss Howard reached Vallejo at home and passed the phone to me. I told him Miss Howard had kept me informed of her talks with him and that I assumed he knew of our interest in hearing what Castro had in mind. Vallejo said he did, and reiterated the invitation to Cuba, stressing the fact that security could be guaranteed. I replied that we felt a preliminary meeting was essential to make sure there was something useful to talk about, and asked if he was able to come to New York. Vallejo said he could not come "at this time." However, if that's how we felt, he said that "we" would send instructions to Lechuga to propose and discuss with me "an agenda" for a later meeting with Castro. I said I would await Lechuga's call. Vallejo's manner was extremely cordial and he called me "Sir" throughout the conversation.

On November 19, I called Chase, and reported the conversation.

[3] If Castro wanted peaceful relations with his neighbors, Stevenson had asserted, he needed to cut ties with Moscow, end his subversive activities in Latin America, and provide basic constitutional rights for his people.